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OUR FUR-SEAL FISHERIES.

BY D. O. MILLS.

THE conclusion to be reached as the result of the diplomatic communications now going on between the governments of the United States and Great Britain in regard to the seal fisheries in Bering Sea is a matter of considerable importance to the commercial world. The question at issue is one which indirectly involves the permanence of an industry of large proportions and the preservation of conditions which appear to be essential to the continuance of a useful and desirable article of commerce.

For the supply of sealskin fur the markets of the world are at the present day all but entirely dependent upon the Bering Sea fisheries. The vast rookeries which at one time existed in the Southern hemisphere—in Patagonia, in the Falkland Islands, in Kerguelen Land, and in numbers of islands in various parts of the Antarctic seas—have been hunted nearly out of existence. Seals are practically unknown where three-quarters of a century ago they were to be counted by millions. Indeed, although that side of the globe is rich in breeding-grounds of the finest description, with cool water, misty atmosphere, and good landings, there are now but a few of these where the seal is found at all. The animal has disappeared before the ruthless energy and unrestrained greed of fishers of all nationalities, who for more than half a century traversed the waters bordering on the Antarctic and slaughtered it; careless whether the prized fur which had attracted them thither should be known to the markets of the future, so long as they succeeded in securing from it, in their own markets, the greatest advantage with the least trouble and expense to themselves.

But for the hospitable retreat offered to the seals in the islands of Bering Sea, it would seem that this wholesale destruction in their original habitat would have signified their total extermi-

nation. In the whole hemisphere north of the equator these islands are the only grounds which are frequented by the seal in any numbers, and are, indeed, the only grounds which meet his requirements. Mr. Henry W. Elliott, in his "Monograph of the Seal Islands of Alaska," states that none are to be found in the Atlantic Ocean above the tropics. As to the North Pacific, a Spanish legend pointed to an abundance of fur seals in prehistoric time on the Santa Barbara and Guadaloupe islands off the coast of California, and on the neighboring peninsula, whence a few were annually taken up to 1835, and some were wont to sport on the Farrallones, off the harbor of San Francisco. But even tradition locates no seal-rookery "anywhere else on the northwest coast, or anywhere else in all Alaska and its islands, save the Pribylov group; and across and down the Asiatic coast only the Commander Islands and a little rock in the Kurile chain have been and are resorted to by them. The crafty savages of that entire region," says Mr. Elliott, "the hairy *Ainos* of Japan, and the Japanese themselves, have for a hundred years searched and searched in vain for such ground."

It may help the reader to a clear comprehension of the situation to state that, of the islands in Bering Sea mentioned above, the Pribylov group, including St. George and St. Paul, belongs to the United States, while the Commander Islands, near the Asiatic shore, including Bering Island and Copper Island, are the property of Russia.

It is from the fact that these islands are, so to speak, the last refuge of a valuable fur-bearing animal, and the main source whence the world draws its supply of the commodity which this animal affords, that the Bering Sea question derives its commercial significance. From the point of view of the interests of commerce, the substantial issue is whether or not this commodity is to be allowed to disappear through the virtual extermination of the seal by the use of methods in the Alaskan waters which have proved fatal to its existence in every other part of the world.

The measures taken by the government of the United States for the regulation and preservation of the Bering Sea seal fisheries were intended to avert this result, and, being framed in accordance with the views of men who had knowledge of the conditions to be met, they were well fitted to accomplish that pur-

pose. The North American Company, which on the 1st of May last succeeded the Alaska Commercial Company as the lessee of the United States, is held, like its predecessor, to the strictest compliance with the rules enacted by Congress with a view to conducting this business so that it shall be at once profitable and economical. The number and the age of seals which may be killed during the year, the period during which the operations of the company's employees may be carried on, the methods which may be employed in securing and killing the seals, and other matters which are known to have an important bearing upon the maintenance of the herds, are defined in the clearest manner by the law ; and these directions can be transgressed by the company or its agents only under severe penalties.

The government maintains also a force of officers to keep watch upon the work done by the lessee, and to make sure that the conditions of the lease are scrupulously complied with. The number of seals which may be killed in any year on the Pribylov Islands is limited to one hundred thousand—seventy-five thousand upon St. Paul and twenty-five thousand upon St. George ; but, if it should be necessary at any time for the preservation of the fur seals, that number may be greatly reduced. No seals must be killed either on the islands or in the waters adjacent to them except during the months of June, July, September, and October, and it is unlawful to kill such seals at any time of the year by the use of firearms. No female seal, nor any seal less than one year old, may be killed at any season of the year. Such are the main restrictions placed by the United States upon the seal fishery ; and there is no reason to fear that the great rookeries in Bering Sea would not continue—would not, indeed, improve—as long as the seal fur should be of value for the use of man, if the industry were carried on only under these salutary regulations.

In violent contrast, however, to these restrictions imposed upon the lessee of the United States government are the utter lawlessness and unscrupulousness of the poachers whose appearance on the fishing-grounds a few years ago led to the present diplomatic complications between our government and that of Great Britain. Their operations are carried on in absolute disregard of the future, their sole thought being of the immediate profit to be made by themselves out of the seals captured. Accordingly,

fishing in the open seas, they turn their attention to the very subjects—the female seals and the young animals—which, in view of the facility with which they may be secured and of the great injury to the herds which would result from their systematic destruction, the United States government has wisely placed upon the restricted list. When the herds enter Bering Sea, about the end of June, nearly every female seal is with young. After the long voyage of two or three thousand miles through the heavy, boisterous waters of the North Pacific, they are naturally tired when they reach these breeding-grounds, and in a condition in which they are an easy prey to the unscrupulous hunter. Even if every such female seal which is killed were secured, it is clear that two seal lives would be destroyed for the sake of a single sealskin. But it is estimated that the hunter secures only one out of three or four such seals killed in the open sea, and on this basis the enormous destruction of seal life by the poachers, in proportion to the sealskins which are furnished for the purposes of commerce through their operations, may be easily estimated. Every sealskin placed upon the market by them represents the destruction of six or eight seals—an utterly unjustifiable inroad into the vitality of the herds, already small enough as a source of supply for the world.

There is the best evidence that the poachers confine themselves almost entirely to this commercially-precious female portion of the herds. It is reported that, out of twenty-five thousand sealskins which resulted from the work of those engaged in this disgraceful traffic, not one male skin could be found. This may be easily understood, for the male seal is strong and alert, and no hunter can get within shooting distance of him, as he can generally escape from the fastest boat pursuing him. And these twenty-five thousand sealskins represented a destruction of seal-life amounting to one hundred and fifty thousand! At this rate it is not difficult to estimate how long seal life can be maintained, if any number of vessels can engage from year to year in its destruction in this way during the months of July, August, and September. In two or three years most of the females would be destroyed, with their young, and in a comparatively short time the entire family would be extinguished, and specimens would be found only in the museums, as the buffaloes are found to-day.

It would not materially improve matters to protect the females from the hunter before parturition takes place. They must be protected during the entire season if their young are not to perish with them. They live only upon fish, and must therefore go to the water for their food. The large fishing-banks on which the Pribylov seals must depend for subsistence are from thirty to sixty miles distant from the islands, and if the females are killed by the hunter there while feeding, the pup left on the island, which does not become able to take care of itself until after September, loses its protector and dies.

Enormous damage is done to the herds also by the manner in which the poachers hunt them in the open sea. It will be remembered that in the enactment regarding the Bering Sea seal fisheries Congress prohibited the use of firearms, and the Alaska Commercial Company, in its regulations for the conduct of affairs on the seal islands, even prohibited dogs from being kept on the islands. The seal is easily frightened, and for the proper development of the rookeries it is essential that he be exempt from any disturbance that can be avoided. Firearms are freely used by the poachers, however. Indeed, that is their chief instrument of slaughter, and the effect of attacking the herds in the water with flotillas of boats, while the air is filled with the sharp reports of guns, is injurious in the extreme. If, as was spoken of some time ago, the poachers should employ steamers in connection with sailing vessels in their work, the injury would be greatly aggravated.

The seals have been so much disturbed within the past two years, during which this controversy has lasted, that the government has been obliged to reduce the catch allowed under the contract for the present year from one hundred thousand to sixty thousand. The latest news from the islands strongly emphasizes the necessity for this step. The seals which have arrived at the grounds do not show the usual proportion of animals that, having regard to their age and quality, can be killed without detriment to the future of the herds. In these circumstances, the company has deemed it necessary to send special instructions to its agents on the islands to redouble the precautions against interference with animals whose capture would involve future loss. The method of killing employed on the islands is such as to render it perfectly practicable to carry

out with the greatest exactness instructions of this character. The seals are driven in droves from the shore to the killing-place, and as the work is done under the eyes of inspectors representing the government and the company, it is certain that no animals are slaughtered in violation of the restrictions it has been deemed proper to impose. From present indications it would not be surprising if the catch this year fell short even of the reduced number allowed by the government.

As confirming the wisdom of the United States in its course toward these islands, in endeavoring to maintain their commercial function as a source of supply of their special product, it is worthy of note that the seal islands on the Asiatic coast, which afford furs of an inferior quality and in considerably smaller quantities, are rigorously protected by the Russian government. These islands, though only a few hundred miles from the Pribylov group, are seldom approached by British or American vessels. The Russians make short work, by confiscation and punishment, of vessels found poaching in that quarter. They have even fired into foreign vessels, without eliciting complaint from the governments whose flags were thus assailed.

It is not the purpose of this article to trench in any measure upon points of international law which belong to the diplomatic discussion of this question. But there are considerations of an international character which cannot be overlooked in viewing the subject from a commercial stand-point. It is a specially pertinent fact that Great Britain has an interest in the maintenance of the Bering Sea fisheries which is shared by no other country. Nearly nine-tenths of the fur-seal skins taken every year go directly to London to be dressed, at least ten thousand people being engaged in that city in the work of preparing the skins for the market. Here is an English industry which depends for its continued existence, at its present proportions at least, on the success of the policy of preserving the Bering Sea fisheries from the fatal inroads of poachers. As a fur-wearing people, the English have as deep a concern as we have in the preservation of the fisheries; and, indeed, Great Britain could profitably afford to pay some one to take care of the herd which has excited the cupidity of its unscrupulous enemies, rather than have the herd destroyed, or be instrumental in aiding those whose operations, if continued, must end in its destruction. And, looking at this

question from a commercial point of view, it would be difficult for any nation to justify itself if by contrivance or connivance it should be accessory to the practical extinguishment of a species of animal which is of commercial importance, and which with proper care might be preserved to commerce for all time. Indeed, the exigencies of the situation might justify combined action on the part of all nations interested for the protection of the waters of Bering Sea pending the settlement of the present diplomatic dispute.

D. O. MILLS.